

Foreword

It wasn't that long ago that I first came into contact with Rachel Singer Gordon. I remember how it happened, back in the spring of 2001, when I got an e-mail from her. She had sent a query to me, proposing to write an article for *Computers in Libraries* magazine. For the month she was querying, *CIL's* theme was "Our Evolving Roles." Rachel's article idea outlined how her own career had evolved.

After library school she took her first entry-level job at a public library outside Chicago. As a younger librarian she was fairly comfortable with PCs, and so she started taking care of some problems, installing some software, etc. As is the case in many jobs, once someone demonstrates an aptitude for certain tasks, others begin to seek her help. A couple years later Rachel found herself in charge of the library computers! Therefore she described herself as an "accidental systems librarian."

I remember thinking what a great title that was. From my experience as the editor of *CIL* (which features articles about library systems) over the years, I had noted that many people were in the same boat. Back when today's middle-aged librarians went to school, the emphasis wasn't on computers. So when they became so prevalent in libraries, the adventurous souls who began toying with them first often became "accidental systems librarians." Although Rachel's situation was slightly different, I knew she'd hit upon a popular concept.

I loved her article query and published "A Course in Accidental Systems Librarianship" that fall (*CIL*, Nov/Dec 01). When I read the first words of that article—"I never wanted to be a computer geek"—I thought, "Amen, sister!" She really struck a chord, and I knew that there were a lot of people who'd appreciate the article. Consequently, I spoke with the editor-in-chief of

my company's book division, John Bryans, and he agreed. Thus, this book was born.

I thought I had loved the original article, but I must say I was even more pleasantly surprised with this greatly expanded book version. More than just telling her own tale, Rachel has now covered every aspect of accidental systems librarianship that I can think of. The book starts with the obvious choices of definitions and competencies and moves to technical topics and techniques like installing hardware and software, programming, Web design, dealing with viruses and security issues, and computer troubleshooting. It also covers networking, organization, continuing education, administration, training others, job hunting, and getting the pay you deserve. It even includes samples of tip sheets, problem reports, and forms that you can adapt for your own use. This is definitely a keep-it-forever reference book.

Let me share just one of my favorite quotes. Rachel encourages readers to keep up with listservs, even though everyone is pressed for time: "Managing your time online requires mastery of the grand art of skimming.... Do not feel compelled to read every message that comes through every list. No one will know!" So while she is delivering tips and instructions, she also delivers encouragement, honesty, and humor. These traits come in especially handy in places like Chapter 8, where the author dives in so deep as to explain how to write a tech plan, how to survive a systems migration, and how to manage a staff. Even with the countless, diverse responsibilities she discusses, she has a way of making them sound almost easy, and of convincing you that you can handle them.

That's what makes this book great—and so necessary. Rachel has, in essence, laid out a detailed road map to enable others to follow her. For all of you who have stumbled into the role of the systems librarian, this book is the map that will help you survive. Each of you has picked up parts of your job along the way, but since you probably don't have much formal training, you'll be lack-

ing in other areas. This book covers them all, in easy-to-read (and sometimes funny) style.

I think this book fills a niche in the market that nobody has even thought to address before. Sure, there's a plethora of general computer books and plenty of systems books on the IT side. But not many speak to the specific needs of librarians. And none that I know of address the accidental systems administrator, who obviously needs to know more than which wires to put together (or whether to go wireless!). People who don't have strong technical backgrounds need to have things explained a little more carefully, and a little more completely. With all the articles I've read in the literature over the past decade, in my own industry magazine and others, I've come to believe that most library sys-admin folks have arrived in those technical jobs by rather circuitous routes. Sometimes I wonder if there are actually any systems librarians out there who studied for and took that job on purpose!

And so there is this vast group of very smart, well-meaning, hard-working people out there who are slogging through their day-to-day jobs as best they can. Their knowledge often comes from little bits of professional training and a whole lot of self-schooling: reading articles, watching listservs, getting tips from colleagues (or teenagers), going to seminars, etc. But now, at last, these people have one all-encompassing book to guide them. I believe that most systems librarians can use this title to review what they've already picked up and to fill in the gaps in their knowledge. What else could they need?

If you're picking up this book—but never meant to—hang on to it! Written from the experience of someone who's traveled this long road before you, this can be your complete map to success. I guarantee that studying *The Accidental Systems Librarian* will ensure that you feel less lost (and more sane) as you travel your own road.

Kathy Dempsey never meant to be a computer geek either. She always loved and worked in libraries; she always knew she wanted

to study journalism. So when she landed a job as a journalist in the library field, it was no accident! She's now the proud editor of Computers in Libraries magazine and Marketing Library Services newsletter. She still swears she's not a total geek, even though she reads about libraries and computers all day long.